



MALE GAZE AND SPECTATORSHIP IN MEGHAM

P.S. Gadha¹, *Elena Sajan²

¹ Department of English, Catholice College, Pathanamthitta

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Thomas College, Ranni

ABSTRACT

Spectators engage with a movie by giving and taking meaning to it. They get involved in the story and look at the world within the film through the eyes of the camera. A film designed for the audience, progressing from a male perspective, undoubtedly subjects the female characters to the male gaze. This paper attempts to analyse how traditionalism is forced upon the spectators with the aid of the male gaze and the employment of limited screen time for women. It studies how the Malayalam movie *Megham* effectively presents Swathi as arrogant and incapable of leading a family life. The male spectators immediately agree with this view because the action is commanded by the hero.

KEYWORDS: Male Gaze, Spectatorship, Conventionalism, Patriarchy, Traditionalism.

INTRODUCTION

The male gaze is the depiction of women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective which objectifies women and empowers men. British film theorist Laura Mulvey coined the term 'male gaze' in her seminal essay titled 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' published in 1975. Mulvey observes, "The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates action" (13).

As a popular media which has a great role in propagating different ideologies in society, films have long utilized the male gaze to perpetuate the socio-cultural conventions regarding women. The 1999 Malayalam film *Megham*, directed by Priyadarshan, portrayed the story from the perspective of Colonel Ravi Varma Thamburan, the male protagonist. This progression of the film from the male perspective failed to bring forward the struggles of Swathi, the female lead, relegating her position to that of an incapable wife and mother.

Male Gaze and Spectatorship in *Megham*

The comedy-drama film *Megham*, tells the story of Colonel Ravi Varma Thamburan, an authoritative man of discipline. Ravi had a failed marriage with his lover Swathi as she could not fit into the traditional ways of Ravi's household. Though it has been five years since their separation, Ravi was distressed by the sight of Swathi, especially since Swathi had found a new partner.

Ravi and his mother try to conform Swathi to the conventional role of a married woman who would take care of her husband and his family. However, Swathi had grown up in a modern environment that allowed her freedom of opinion and an identity of her own. When Swathi does not yield to their efforts, she is blamed for not being a good wife or a mother and her inability is attributed to her modernist lifestyle. The story progresses through Ravi's perspective and lacks enough screen time for the character of Swathi, thereby colonising the audience's minds and fostering a conventionalist attitude.

Ravi's mother did not approve of his marriage to Swathi since the beginning. She has checked Swathi's background from the time Swathi had been studying in Shimla, Bombay and Madras. She could not come to terms with Swathi's style of living. Ravi's mother does not mind the caste, religion, or status of the bride-to-be, nor does she care if the girl is illiterate or from a village. However, her son's bride should be able to take care of him and Ravi's mother believes that Swathi is not capable of it, stating: "She can't do it" (00:13:23). Ravi's mother lays down several photographs of Swathi dressed in modern clothes and states her reason of objection as: "A girl who has lived like this cannot be brought into the family. It is said that the cows accustomed of grazing outside cannot be contained in the barn" (00:12:48-00:12:55).

Without taking the slightest effort to talk to Swathi, Ravi's mother's stronghold conventionalism drives her to pass judgement based on pure prejudice about the modern lifestyle, which somehow deprives women of all the qualities necessary to run a successful family. The way a woman dress and the language that she speaks becomes the ruling scale of her character. Had Swathi been draped in a saree in the photographs or had she not studied in the cities, she might have been deemed eligible for the role of an ideal wife.

Ravi's mother does not hesitate to leave the couple on their own, since they get

married against her will. However, she returns to them upon learning that Swathi is pregnant. She shows care and affection to Swathi for the sake of her grandchild. She hands over their traditional jewellery to Swathi and insists that Swathi follows traditional pregnancy healthcare. Her insistence on healthcare and jewellery can be considered a way of binding Swathi within the traditions. When Swathi loses the child owing to an accidental abortion, she blames her for not taking care of the baby. Yet again, his mother leaves the couple saying, "She was not the type of girl my son needed" (00:50:25-00:50:30). Her expectation of an 'innocent' girl was any woman who adhered to the patriarchal conventions.

According to patriarchal conventions, a woman is supposed to be nurturing and caring. Swathi's abortion is pointed out as her inability as a conventional woman. Ravi's mother had warned Ravi from the beginning that he and Swathi was not a good match and that Swathi cannot lead a family. As Simon de Beauvoir states in her book, *The Second Sex*:

She has no choice but to build a stable life where the present, prolonging the past, escapes the threats of tomorrow, that is, precisely to create happiness...within the walls of her home she will be in charge of managing, she will enclose the world; she will perpetuate the human species into the future (533).

Before marriage, Ravi defended Swathi from the scrutiny of his mother, stating that Swathi's dress and lifestyle were completely normal and it had just to do with his mother's orthodox mentality. However, his entire demeanour undergoes a change after their marriage. Ravi is suddenly depicted as an authoritative figure, an extension of his authority at work. Ravi expects everyone around him, including Swathi, to obey him and respect his decisions whereas he does not reciprocate the same attitude. He gets annoyed to see Swathi talking over the phone with her friends and suspects her.

Ravi is much concerned about his dignity as an individual and as a distinguished military official and takes much pride in being a 'Thamburan'. However, he does not hesitate to conveniently put the dignity down to slap his wife in front of a crowd because she arrived late to his colleague's party. Viewers never get to see how Swathi dealt with the incident. The agony that Swathi undergoes is evident through her uneasy expressions and weary glances at her husband. Ravi uses his power to subjugate his wife. This incident reveals how Swathi becomes a victim of domestic abuse.

It is alarming to see that Ravi never apologised to Swathi for slapping her until he realises that she is pregnant and he wants to go back to the "normal" life they had been living, forgetting everything that had happened so far. When Swathi loses the baby, Ravi instantly blames her. He thinks that Swathi has aborted the child on purpose because she did not want to compromise on her beauty for the sake of having a child and says that he overheard Swathi talking to her friend about how she was not prepared to be a mother. Ravi stoops to the level to call their pet dog, Jhansi, his wife's name- "Swathi." Ravi justifies this act by telling his assistant: "Jhansi is the name of a brave woman who highlighted the dignity of Indian women. Do not call a dog by that name... Just call her Swathi from tomorrow. Call that bitch Swathi" (00:51:32-00:51:42). He does not take time to reflect upon his mistakes or to comfort Swathi, who has lost her child. Instead, he finds it easy to put the blame on her rather than address his faults. Furthermore, he

believes that Swathi is the reason behind the untimely death of his mother, for she died of the pain of witnessing the failed marital relationship of her son.

Ravi's character holds a narcissistic complex which is evident through different instances in the film. He always deems his actions right and never admits his faults. He never takes others' opinions into consideration. This is evident when he says to Swathi: "Don't try to argue, just obey what I say" (00:42:37-00:42:39). After many clashes with Swathi, Ravi can only think of his sufferings when he says to Swathi: "What have you endured? Wasn't I the only one who suffered? Didn't I put up with the whole pretence of your modern life? Didn't I put up with your antics of sophistication?" (00:50:56-00:51:04). Ravi never thinks from others perspective and decides everything on his own. Ravi also assumes that Meenakshi would be willing to marry him without any objections. Towards the end of the film, Swathi calls him out on his narcissistic character when she says: "You have hurt all those who loved you. Perhaps you are still doing the same. Because you have never been able to love anyone but yourself. You are a narcissist. You can love only one person in this world, and that is yourself" (02:01:17-02:01:41).

Ravi also holds double standards. When Swathi says sorry, he yells at her saying: "You have learned a word in English. Do any atrocities and says sorry. That is it" (00:42:17-00:42:21). This must be seen against the earlier incident where all he could force out was a "sorry" after he slapped Swathi for being late to his colleague's party in front of everyone. Swathi calls him out on his double standards as she says: "Sorry. forgive me. I did not mean it; you have learned a few words in English to get away with anything you want. You do any atrocities, behave any which way you want, hurt anybody, and then say sorry and as far as your concern, the sorry is there" (00:45:19-00:45:37).

In another instance, Ravi gets annoyed to see Swathi has moved with another man and comments: "She is still Mrs. Swathi Thamburan until the court grants her divorce. She should have at least remembered that before she decided to bring a fool in front of me" (00:36:25-00:36:33). This incident annoys him to an extent that he swears to never sign the divorce papers. Ironically, Ravi rethinks about this decision when he develops a liking towards Meenakshi. Their legal marital status does not stop him from dreaming of a future with Meenakshi and this dream gets him to sign the divorce documents saying "Goodbye, goodbye to old memories and welcome to new desires" (01:34:23-01:34:28). This becomes another example of how women must put up with the actions of men no matter how unfair it is and they are never supposed to complain about the same.

Ravi and his mother forget that Swathi was not prepared to be a mother. Moreover, the film does not depict the agony of losing her own child. When he blames Swathi for purposefully aborting the child, Swathi could not hold back from standing up for herself after all her attempts at reconciliation fail and she says that "No matter what happens, it is my fault. I tried so hard not to create problems on my own yet you could not back off. You blame me for anything, there is a limit to tolerance" (00:50:44-00:50:55). Swathi puts an end to their suffering, shattering their wedding photograph and saying "You want a puppet as your wife, so better get married to a stupid, idiotic village girl" (00:52:00-00:52:05). The shattering of their photograph suggests the end of good memories and the hopes of a joyful married life which cannot be glued together anymore. Viewers might as well question this action of Swathi being aggressive than questioning Ravi about slapping her because traditional viewers want to perceive women as passive. According to Mulvey, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalances, pleasures in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the male figure" (10). The patriarchy demands the same from women. They must remain passive to be desired and that passiveness attributes to her quality of being a traditional woman. It is this attribution of passivity that makes the spectators never acknowledge women's perspectives in films. While the male commands the stage and direct the actions, the female must remain as the object of passivity.

After Ravi and Swathi get legally separated, the sight of Swathi on several occasions causes him distress. The same distress causes him to take a break from his official duties and go on a break to Chandragiri, the village of Mani. At Chandragiri, Ravi takes a liking to Meenakshi- Mani's lover. Meenakshi is a typical village girl, wearing traditional clothes, abiding by elder's decisions, and following the customs. Meenakshi is heavily controlled by her grandmother, Aachamma who is presented as an authoritative figure in the family. According to the instructions of Aachamma, Meenakshi is forced to assist Ravi during his residence in their village. While Ravi suffers from an injury, she tends to all his needs like attending to the wounds, feeding him meals, and keeping the house. Eventually, Ravi starts dreaming of a future with Meenakshi while she remains unaware of his desires for her. In this movie, Meenakshi is employed as a foil to Swathi. Foil characters make the protagonist stand out, often creating tension and conflict in the story. Meenakshi's character is employed by the film makers to aggravate the contrast with Swathi's attributes. Ravi tries to mend his heart broken by a modern woman using the other extreme.

The viewers are forced to see the happenings from the male lead's perspective and are deprived of any chance to sympathise with or think of things from Swathi's side. Having been in a happy relationship, Swathi had expected the same harmony in their married life. But to her surprise, Ravi's demeanour

changes after the marriage. But Swathi is clearly seen adjusting after their marriage to blend with Ravi's house. We hear her talking on the phone with her friend, "No it's different, the life we had and the life today. My husband? No, he is fine, a little conservative. Either he must change or I must. You know, marriage is always an adjustment...All those days are gone" (00:40:44-00:41:23). This is clear evidence of how Swathi tries to change for the sake of their relationship and how she feels restricted.

Swathi does not have any other option but to separate from Ravi when she does not get the rightful respect or freedom from him. Her efforts in putting up with the change of environment and compromises she made to continue their marriage get overlooked by Ravi. However, Swathi could not sacrifice her dignity anymore. Swathi still displays maturity to talk it out with Ravi when she meets Ravi to invite him to her wedding. Despite Ravi's attempts to hide from the truth, Swathi makes sure that he confronts the truth because she is no longer his wife and he can no longer suppress her voice. It is from this confrontation that Ravi recognises his fault and drops his attempt to separate Mani and Meenakshi.

Swathi had married Ravi with the hope of leading a happy life. But she could not be the perfect wife and daughter-in-law according to their conventional standards. While Ravi's mother served first-hand in trying to conform Swathi within their conventions, Ravi acted as a support. The camera lens failed to represent Swathi's side of the story. Thus, the viewers never questioned the male lead.

CONCLUSION

A gynocritical reading of the films makes us wonder how many women characters could have been looked upon in a different light if was not for the male gaze. The male gaze, which had dominated the film industry for ages, is the prominent factor in promoting patriarchal values. When women had always been the objects to be gazed upon, the viewers could not be blamed for not critically questioning the plot. The conventionally trained viewer can only applaud Ravi's attempts to get over his struggles despite how the film sidelined Swathi's expectations and struggles. A gynocritical reading of *Megham* exposes the mainstream media's hidden agenda of fostering conventionalism.

When the heterosexual, male spectators adopt the male gaze, the female spectators are forced to do the same. If the male spectator finds pleasure in objectifying women, the female spectators are helpless to follow them. Thus, they imbibe the patriarchal values projected upon the women in the films.

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